

UNICAMERAL UPDATE

News published daily at Update.Legislature.ne.gov

Vol. 43, Issue 11/ March 23 - 25, 2020

Legislature advances emergency coronavirus funding

Lawmakers passed a bill March 25 that provides emergency funding to combat the coronavirus pandemic in Nebraska.

Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk suspended the legislative session March 16 in response to growing public health concerns regarding the virus's spread. He called senators back into session March 23 for the limited purpose of approving emergency funding.

Scheer thanked lawmakers for their willingness to put themselves at risk to provide additional resources to the executive branch.

"It is truly an historic time in our country and for us to be here, to be able to do something to help the residents of the state of Nebraska," he said.

Gering Sen. John Stinner offered an amendment March 23 that replaced the contents of his LB1198, which senators previously had advanced to the second round of debate. The bill originally would have appropriated \$41,000 for restoration of the doors to the George W. Norris Legislative Chamber.

Instead, the amendment appropriates a total of \$83.6 million to bolster the state's response to the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

Funds will be transferred from the state's Cash Reserve Fund to the Governor's Emergency Cash Fund. Dollars then will be directed to a newly created program to be known as the Governor's Emergency Program -



Only lawmakers, essential staff and the media were allowed in the legislative chamber while senators worked to pass LB1198.

COVID-19, housed within the state's Military Department.

Stinner said using the new program as the single funding source for the state's efforts to combat COVID-19, rather than making separate appropriations to individual agencies, will simplify the process and allow adaptability and flexibility.

Among the funding priorities outlined in Gov. Pete Ricketts's request to the Legislature are:

- \$38.2 million for personal protective gear and other supplies and support for local health departments;
- \$13 million to maintain staffing at veterans' homes and state Department of Health and Human Services care facilities;
- \$4 million for additional staff-

ing and overtime costs for the DHHS Division of Public Health;

- \$2.5 million to the University of Nebraska Medical Center for lab equipment, software programming and personnel;
- \$515,000 to UNMC to facilitate COVID-19 testing; and
- \$344,000 to establish a state-wide communication system to share information related to response efforts.

Stinner said the amendment also provides \$25 million in unobligated funds. The current situation is fluid, he said, and the additional funds will be held in reserve for unforeseen needs that may arise.

"We'll get through this," Stinner

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said. "But now it's our turn to lay down our partisan politics and pass this bill for the state to protect the safety and well-being of all Nebraskans."

Lincoln Sen. Kate Bolz said she hoped to see the unobligated resources prioritized for vulnerable populations served by nursing facilities and federally qualified health centers.

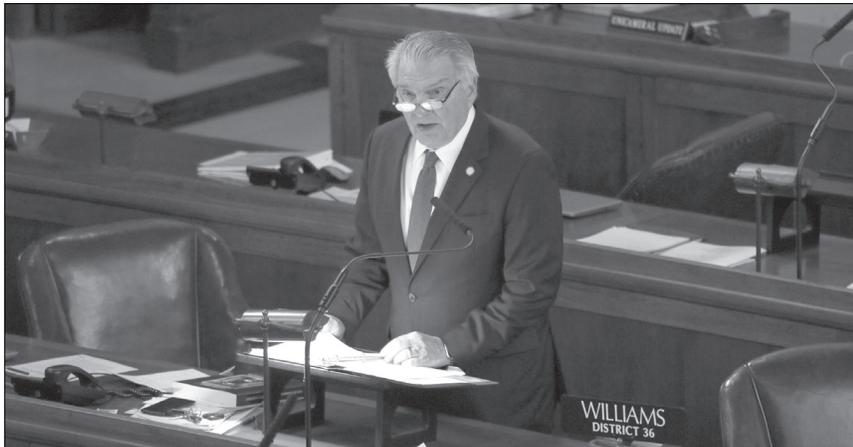
Following the 44-0 adoption of the amendment, lawmakers advanced LB1198 to final reading by voice vote March 23. The bill passed March 25

on a vote of 45-0.

Scheer praised senators for their quick and decisive action.

"I thank you for the passage of the bill," he said. "We have provided not only what the governor has asked, but we have provided [him] with additional funds that will help him and the state to recover and minimize the damage done to our economy and our residents."

LB1198 was signed by the governor March 25 and took effect immediately. ■



Sen. John Stinner said the new COVID-19 response program will be efficient and transparent.

Legislative session suspended due to COVID-19 pandemic

Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk announced March 16 that the 2020 legislative session is suspended indefinitely due to public health concerns regarding the spread of the new coronavirus.

In his announcement, Scheer said the decision was made in accordance with federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and in consultation with local public health officials, Gov. Pete Ricketts and Lincoln Sen. Mike Hilgers, chairperson of the Executive Board.

Scheer said the Legislature will remain adjourned until the COVID-19 situation has stabilized in Nebraska.

"This is a fluid situation and one that changes daily," he said. "We appreciate your understanding and flexibility."

No date has been set for the 2020 session to reconvene. Updates will be provided on the Legislature's website as they become available at www.NebraskaLegislature.gov. ■

UNICAMERAL UPDATE

The Unicameral Update is a free, weekly newsletter published during the legislative session. It is produced by the Clerk of the Legislature's Office through the Unicameral Information Office. For print subscriptions, call 402-471-2788 or email uio@leg.ne.gov. Visit us online at Update.Legislature.ne.gov, twitter.com/UnicamUpdate and facebook.com/UnicameralUpdate.

Clerk of the Legislature: Patrick J. O'Donnell

Editor: Kate Heltzel; Writers: Kyle Harpster, Ami Johnson, Mike Malloy; Photographer: Bess Ghormley

Printed copies of bills, resolutions and the Legislative Journal are available at the State Capitol room 1104, or by calling 402-471-2709 or 800-742-7456. Status of bills and resolutions can be requested at that number or can be found on NebraskaLegislature.gov. Live video of hearings and floor debate can be viewed on NET2 and at NetNebraska.org/capitol.

Senators may be contacted by mail at this address:

Senator Name, District #, State Capitol, P.O. Box 94604, Lincoln, NE 68509-4604

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THE NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE'S OFFICIAL NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1977

SENATOR CONTACT INFO

Sen. Joni Albrecht Thurston, District 17 Room 1404 (402) 471-2716 jalbrecht@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist17	Sen. Robert Clements Elmwood, District 2 Room 1120 (402) 471-2613 rclements@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist02	Sen. Ben Hansen Blair, District 16 11th Floor (402) 471-2728 bhansen@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist16	Sen. Steve Lathrop Omaha, District 12 Room 1103 (402) 471-2623 slathrop@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist12	Sen. Dan Quick Grand Island, District 35 Room 1406 (402) 471-2617 dquick@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist35
Sen. John Arch La Vista, District 14 Room 1306 (402) 471-2730 jarch@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist14	Sen. Sue Crawford Bellevue, District 45 Room 1012 (402) 471-2615 scrawford@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist45	Sen. Matt Hansen Lincoln, District 26 Room 2010 (402) 471-2610 mhansen@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist26	Sen. Brett Lindstrom Omaha, District 18 Room 2015 (402) 471-2618 blindstrom@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist18	Sen. Jim Scheer Norfolk, District 19 Room 2103 (402) 471-2929 jscheer@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist19
Sen. Carol Blood Bellevue, District 3 Room 1021 (402) 471-2627 cblood@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist03	Sen. Wendy DeBoer Bennington, District 10 Room 1114 (402) 471-2718 wdeboer@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist10	Sen. Mike Hilgers Lincoln, District 21 Room 2108 (402) 471-2673 mhilgers@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist21	Sen. Lou Ann Linehan Elkhorn, District 39 Room 1116 (402) 471-2885 llinehan@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist39	Sen. Julie Slama Peru, District 1 11th Floor (402) 471-2733 jslama@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist01
Sen. Kate Bolz Lincoln, District 29 Room 1015 (402) 471-2734 kbolz@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist29	Sen. Myron Dorn Adams, District 30 11th Floor (402) 471-2620 mdorn@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist30	Sen. Robert Hilkemann Omaha, District 4 Room 2028 (402) 471-2621 rhilkemann@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist04	Sen. John Lowe Kearney, District 37 Room 2011 (402) 471-2726 jlowe@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist37	Sen. John Stinner Gering, District 48 Room 1004 (402) 471-2802 jstinner@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist48
Sen. Bruce Bostelman Brainard, District 23 Room 1118 (402) 471-2719 bbostelman@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist23	Sen. Steve Erdman Bayard, District 47 Room 1124 (402) 471-2616 serdman@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist47	Sen. Sara Howard Omaha, District 9 Room 1402 (402) 471-2723 showard@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist09	Sen. John McCollister Omaha, District 20 Room 1017 (402) 471-2622 jmccollister@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist20	Sen. Tony Vargas Omaha, District 7 Room 1000 (402) 471-2721 tvargas@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist07
Sen. Tom Brandt Plymouth, District 32 Room 1528 (402) 471-2711 tbrandt@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist32	Sen. Curt Friesen Henderson, District 34 Room 1110 (402) 471-2630 cfriesen@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist34	Sen. Dan Hughes Venango, District 44 Room 1117 (402) 471-2805 dhughes@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist44	Sen. Mike McDonnell Omaha, District 5 Room 2107 (402) 471-2710 mmcdonnell@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist05	Sen. Lynne Walz Fremont, District 15 Room 1403 (402) 471-2625 lwalz@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist15
Sen. Tom Brewer Gordon, District 43 Room 1101 (402) 471-2628 tbrewer@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist43	Sen. Suzanne Geist Lincoln, District 25 Room 2000 (402) 471-2731 sgeist@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist25	Sen. Megan Hunt Omaha, District 8 Room 1523 (402) 471-2722 mhunt@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist08	Sen. Adam Morfeld Lincoln, District 46 Room 1008 (402) 471-2720 amorfeld@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist46	Sen. Justin Wayne Omaha, District 13 Room 1115 (402) 471-2727 jwayne@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist13
Sen. Tom Briese Albion, District 41 Room 1019 (402) 471-2631 tbriese@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist41	Sen. Tim Gragert Creighton, District 40 11th Floor (402) 471-2801 tgragert@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist40	Sen. Rick Kolowski Omaha, District 31 Room 1018 (402) 471-2327 rkolowski@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist31	Sen. Mike Moser Columbus, District 22 Room 1529 (402) 471-2715 mmoser@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist22	Sen. Matt Williams Gothenburg, District 36 Room 1401 (402) 471-2642 mwilliams@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist36
Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh Omaha, District 6 11th Floor (402) 471-2714 mcavanaugh@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist06	Sen. Mike Groene North Platte, District 42 Room 1107 (402) 471-2729 mgroene@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist42	Sen. Mark Kolterman Seward, District 24 Room 2004 (402) 471-2756 mkolterman@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist24	Sen. Dave Murman Glenvil, District 38 Room 1522 (402) 471-2732 dmurman@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist38	Sen. Anna Wishart Lincoln, District 27 Room 1308 (402) 471-2632 awishart@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist27
Sen. Ernie Chambers Omaha, District 11 Room 1302 (402) 471-2612 news.legislature.ne.gov/dist11	Sen. Steve Halloran Hastings, District 33 Room 1022 (402) 471-2712 shalloran@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist33	Sen. Andrew La Grone Gretna, District 49 11th Floor (402) 471-2725 alagrone@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist49	Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks Lincoln, District 28 Room 1016 (402) 471-2633 ppansingbrooks@leg.ne.gov news.legislature.ne.gov/dist28	

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